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"SCHOOL AND HOME: FOCUS ON ACHIEVEMENT"
A Plan to Raise the Achievement Level of Underachieving
Elementary Children

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U. S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION AND WELFARE
Office of Education

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During the past two years, a program which aims to raise the academic achievement level of underachieving children has been under way. This program began in two elementary schools in 1961 and was expanded to a third elementary school in September 1962. At this time, approximately 2,300 children are included.

When the program was initiated, procedure was established to evaluate it at the end of the 1961-62 school year. Staff has now appraised this program and a report, which includes a description and the evaluation, is attached. This report was prepared by Dr. Mildred Smith who has coordinated the program.

L. Lewis

General Superintendent
of Community Education

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Experimental Schools

"School and Home: Focus on Achievement" was an experimental program designed to raise the academic level of under-achieving elementary school children. The experiment was undertaken in two elementary public schools during the 1961-62 school year. It involved approximately 1,000 children enrolled in kindergarten through grade six.

Children in the experimental schools were Negroes primarily from low-income families living in the industrial city of Flint, Michigan. With few exceptions, parents of these children had come from the rural South to seek employment in local industrial plants. Their educational backgrounds, therefore, are quite limited.

Elementary school children with similar socio-economic backgrounds, who were enrolled in another Flint public school, served as a control group for this experiment.

The Theoretical Frame of Reference

The theoretical frame of reference for this study was based on the action theorist's postulations that the group in which the individual is socialized influences his motivation to achieve in school.¹ It seemed obvious, then, that a program designed to raise the achievement level of children who lacked the necessary motivation to achieve adequately must involve working with these children's "significant others"² for the purpose of getting them to EXPECT more of these children.

After the above generalization was made, the remaining question that needed answering was: "Who are the 'significant others' for these children?" An assumption was made that parents and teachers are "significant others" for elementary children in so far as academic achievement is concerned. It was further assumed that parents relate in a more significant way to the children than do teachers because young children learn their interests and values from them.

Teachers have always been identified as an important influence on children's school achievement. This program has tapped another, and possibly more significant, source of influence upon the child's school learning -- the PARENT.

¹See George H. Mead, *Mind, Self and Society*, Charles W. Morris, ed.; Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1934, p. 38. and W. B. Brookover, "Some Social Psychological Conceptions of Classroom Learning." *School and Society*, 87. 84-7, 1959.

²"Significant others" is defined as those people who are important to an individual.

The program which is based on the theoretical frame described earlier is theoretically justifiable for three reasons. First, it restores to the family their rightful responsibility for teaching the child; second, it gives to the family pride and responsibility for being the teacher; and third, it brings together the child's "significant others," -- the parent and the teacher -- as partners, not competitors or strangers, in the child's learning process. Neither can do this job in opposition to or apart from the other.

A description of some of the characteristics and problems of the under-achieving child is presented below. This description is followed by a résumé of the program which was designed to bring the child's "significant others", teachers and parents, together as partners to improve the child's achievement. This program is appropriately entitled: "School and Home: Focus on Achievement."

The Under-Achieving Child -- His Characteristics and His Problems

The typical under-achieving child has some characteristics that can be identified by observation. When one visits a classroom, one can determine by informal observation whether individual children are high-, average-, or under-achievers. This can be done primarily by watching their work habits and the attitudes they exhibit toward their school tasks. The under-achiever has a poor attitude toward his school work and he has poor work habits. If one asks the typical under-achiever to open his notebook, one finds that it contains torn and rumpled papers and lacks organization. An examination of his desk reveals a jumbled assortment of wrappers from bubble gum, candy, etc. He is frequently without pencil and paper. If he has a pencil, it is short and unsharpened. If he is asked to take a sheet of paper from his notebook, he will jerk or tear it from the notebook rings rather than open the rings to remove the paper intact. What do these observations tell us about the under-achiever? They tell us that he is not interested in his school assignment; it is not important to him and, therefore, he cannot see any reason for working at it.

An examination of the notebook of a typical high-achiever reveals good organization. Notebook dividers will separate papers for the various subjects that he studies. He has a supply of clean paper in his notebook. He always has two sharpened pencils (a spare one ready for emergency use). His desk is neatly organized--pencils and erasers in one section and books in the other section. The high-achiever invariably has a library book in his desk which he keeps handy to read when he completes his work earlier than many of his classmates. One of the reasons he finishes early is simply because he works harder than others do. The high-achiever wants to do good work in school. It is very important to him; therefore, if he can, he achieves at a high level in school.

The student who works with one eye on the teacher and the other eye on his paper; who talks and pokes others when the teacher turns her back toward him to write on the board; who is interested in playing with gadgets kept in his pockets and desk; and who occupies a large portion of his time with eating bits of candy, pretzels, and potato chips will not achieve as much as the child who exhibits interest in school work by listening to assignments and directives; working at a task until

completed; studying his vocabulary and spelling words; and, who is not satisfied with a job until it is done well. The latter student is motivated from within himself to do good work in school. He has determination, drive, desire, and ambition to achieve. These qualities contribute as much to school success as native ability. The major difference between the underachiever and the high-achiever is "the will to do."

The problem of getting the underachiever to do better in school rests with our ability to develop a desire to do good work and to learn his school subjects. In order to accomplish this goal, one must first examine reasons why the underachiever does not possess a desire to achieve in school.

Every individual's values and goals are learned from those people who are most important to him. This learning occurs, in most instances, in an incidental manner. He begins to imitate the behavior of those important people at a very early age. These important people are, first of all, his parents. At a later time, when the child enters school, the teacher becomes one of these important people. How important or influential the teacher is to most children has not been determined. The teacher's degree of effective importance to children varies with circumstances; but in most instances, it is secondary to that of parents. Exceptions probably occur when children are deprived of parental affection and are forced to seek a surrogate.

Since the home and the school influence children's school achievement, the home and the school must be the focus for helping the underachiever improve his achievement. A brief discussion of the problem faced by the home and the school follows.

The importance of the home environment on school achievement. The values and attitudes that parents possess form the pattern by which the child's values and attitudes are shaped. Much of what a child learns from his parents is learned indirectly. For example, if a father takes pride in his car and washes and polishes it frequently, his son will observe this and will likewise value that car. If a father reads books frequently for enjoyment, his son will observe this and will be more likely to read books for enjoyment. If parents have routine in the home--certain chores which must be done at a certain time and done well--the child will develop the habit of doing a job on time and doing it well. It is the EXAMPLE that is set for the child which determines what the child's attitudes and values will be. A child who comes from a home void of books, magazines, newspapers, and a dictionary will not see these items as important in his daily living and, therefore, will not value them. What is said to a child is not important unless this TALK is supported by EXAMPLE. The saying: "What you do speaks so loudly that I can't hear what you're saying," applies here.

The child who comes to school from a home in which he is required to do a job on time and rewarded for doing it well; in which he sees his parents reading books and magazines as leisure-time activities; and in which his parents show an interest in his school work by asking questions of him, has a good chance for success in school. A child of like ability who comes from a home in which there is little or no routine; in which his parents seldom if ever read anything for enjoyment; (though they may manifest loving care for an automobile, pets, furniture, sports equipment, etc.); and in which his parents show no interest in what he is doing in school; in which no one appears to care whether he does a job well and at a particular time, has much less chance for success in school.

An identification of reasons why some children achieve at a level far below what they can do thus shows that the solution to this problem rests heavily upon changing the behavior and attitudes of parents. There is real hope for solution, because basically almost all parents wish the best for their children. Nevertheless, many of them are unaware of the fact that what they do has such an impact on their children's school work, so that in the case of the under-achiever it is what parents are not doing that is the salient influence. In addition, these parents do not know what they should be doing to help their children. If they are informed in a manner that will not offend or embarrass them, they are most grateful for this kind of assistance.³

The importance of the school environment on school achievement. The second phase of the problem rests with the school itself. Since the vast majority of under-achievers are known to come from homes that have a climate which is not conducive to developing in the child the attitudes and values needed to achieve in school, teachers of these children are confronted with some additional problems which make their job more difficult. These problems, as described earlier, include all of the escape mechanisms employed by children who are not interested in school but are in school because their attendance is compulsory. This places teachers in a position of policing and checking up on children so that they become even further alienated and are deprived of the satisfaction other teachers receive when their children do good work and achieve. Children's success in school highly rewards a conscientious teacher for her efforts.

Teachers who don't receive such rewards become depressed and lose enthusiasm have two courses of action to take. They can request a transfer to another school by saying, "The other school is closer to my home and I am getting older and don't like driving on the snow and ice across town to work." A perceptive personnel director will try to accommodate a good teacher who has given years of service to the school system by helping her out with the "snow and ice" problem. The second course of action that can be taken by teachers who have lost enthusiasm is to stay at the school but assume that they are in a hopeless situation. They adjust to the situation by thinking, "What's the use? These children can't learn anyway." Neither course of action improves the situation. Some teachers with missionary zeal remain in these schools and continue to try.

Many teachers need help to understand that the problem of the under-achiever is not always one of insufficient capacity or ability, but is rather, one of inadequate environmental support or motivation. Moreover, high staff turnover undermines the instructional program in a school. Many new teachers in one building create a supervision load for the principal and the consultants. The principal is further burdened by family welfare problems which are known to exist in the homes of most under-achieving pupils. In addition, much of the principal's time is frequently consumed in attempts to identify an individual who started an argument or fight enroute to or from school. Teachers who transfer may not order an adequate supply of materials for the new teacher because of pending grade assignment changes. All of these problems--teacher turnover, inexperience, problems of maintaining good discipline--may mean that teachers' time as well as materials may not be used as advantageously as is possible under more favorable circumstances. These conditions which are aggravated by the problems that children bring with them to school further undermine the achievement of under-achieving children.

³ This has been carried out successfully at Clark and Parkland elementary schools.

Solution to the problem of underachievement, therefore, rests with (1) improving home situations which cause children to develop poor attitudes toward school achievement, and (2) creating a more desirable situation in the school which will raise teacher morale and reduce teacher turnover. Both problems must be attacked together since one problem aggravates the other; otherwise, the vicious cycle cannot be broken.

THE EXPERIMENTAL PROGRAM

Objectives of the Program

The purpose of the program is to raise the achievement level of children who are achieving at a lower level than they should be. This program requires that parents and teachers work together to improve children's basic attitudes toward school work and to improve their work habits in school.

The objectives of this program were carried out by:

1. Helping academically disinterested parents develop or raise their expectations of their children and helping them provide a climate at home that is conducive to study.

Parents were expected to:

- a. Provide a quiet period in the home each day for reading and study assigned by the teacher. They were told: "This period is to be at a regular time so that it becomes a part of the life of the child. Remind the child of his assignment. Young children will forget."
 - b. Read regularly to their children, including preschool-age children.
 - c. Read regularly in the presence of their children.
 - d. Listen to their children read.
 - e. Show interest in their children's work by asking questions and giving praise when deserved, and encouragement when needed.
 - f. Prevent the school-age child's work from being damaged or destroyed by preschool-age children.
 - g. See that the child has pencils and paper at school and at home so that he has the tools necessary for doing a good job.
 - h. Get the child to bed at a regular time each night so that he gets the proper sleep and rest.
 - i. Get the child up each morning with adequate time for a good breakfast.
 - j. Remind the child of work papers, books, etc., that should be returned to school. (Young children need this assistance.)
 - k. Have the child leave home with the attitude of going to school for the purpose of learning.
2. Helping teachers understand underlying causes of underachievement, particularly among children who lack motivation from parents.
 3. Helping teachers update teaching materials and teaching techniques so that they will be utilized most effectively with underachieving children.

Description of the Program

Teachers and Parents made plans. After teachers had decided to carry out this program, parent meetings were scheduled for the purpose of explaining the program to them and asking them to participate. The objectives of the program were outlined to parents. Parents reacted favorable to the plan and agreed to carry out suggested activities, (see items a through k, page 5). A bulletin was provided for each parent who attended the meetings. This bulletin was discussed with parents. Teachers agreed to meet monthly to discuss and exchange ideas and teaching techniques.

The home study assignments. Each family was asked to set aside a quiet time in the home each day so that the child can do home assignments. These daily assignments consisted primarily of vocabulary study and independent reading from trade and supplementary reading books. The teachers kept a large wall chart and noted on it whether or not the child completed the assignment. All children (excluding kindergarten-age group) were included in this activity. If a child frequently omitted completing his assignment, the parent was invited to the school for a conference.

The reading incentives program. This program is referred to as the "Bookworm Club." Children in grades 2 through 6 were provided with a tally-sheet on which they placed stickers on the fifteen segments of "bookworm"--one for each new book read. This program allowed them to earn a "bookworm" lapel button when six segments were covered, and a "diploma" when all fifteen were covered.

Dictionaries provided for home study. A child's dictionary was made available to each family with a child in grade 4, 5, or 6. This dictionary was used for vocabulary study at home. For the majority of families, this was the first child's dictionary they had ever owned.

The read-aloud program. Parents were asked to read aloud to their children each day for the purpose of stimulating interest in reading and showing the children that reading is important to parents. A booklet which gives parents suggestions about how to read to children was prepared and discussed with them at a PTA meeting.

Kindergarten children took a book home for parents to read to them. On the days that kindergarten and primary children took books home for parents to read to them, they wore tags on their lapels which read, "Please read to me." Older children were given bookmarkers imprinted, "May I read to you?"

Material provided for teachers and pupils. Every effort was made to provide new material for teachers and pupils. New materials help to motivate, encourage, and raise the morale of teachers and children.

Since underachieving pupils need special help with vocabulary development, each primary level child was provided with a file box for word cards. Each child recorded on a card in his file box every word that caused difficulty. He was encouraged to study his words at school and to take them home for study. Later elementary school children kept their vocabulary cards in an envelope which was punched to fit their notebooks. They, too, were encouraged to study at school and at home. Parents were told how to help them study the words listed. Multi-level reading materials were provided for the children.

Clerical help provided for teachers. The services of a co-op. business student were provided to type and duplicate worksheets for use by children.

Mothers helped with reading project. Mothers were involved to make reading booklets for children by cutting apart primary level reading textbooks that were no longer used in the schools. Individual stories from the textbooks were stapled together and placed between colorful covers which were decorated with attractive pictures.

Children who have trouble with reading resist thick books because they lack confidence in themselves. These children read many of the one-story booklets which had no grade level identification. Older children who read them were, therefore, not aware that many of the stories contained a preprimer level vocabulary. They developed a feeling of accomplishment and, therefore, gained self-confidence. This self-confidence is essential if the child is to learn to read.

Mothers who participated in this program felt that they were helping the children with reading. Children who read these booklets knew that mothers had come to school and had made the booklets for them to read.

EVALUATION OF THE PROGRAM

Formal and informal techniques were utilized to evaluate this program. Reading tests were administered in pre- and post-testing situations. Parents and teachers were asked to give opinions regarding the program. In addition, a survey was undertaken to determine if parents had set aside a quiet time in the home. Findings from these evaluations follow.

Reading Tests Results

Forms 1 and 2 of the Gates Revised Reading tests were administered in pre- and post-test situations to all children in the two experimental schools. The same test was simultaneously administered to all second and fifth grade students in pre- and post-test situations in a third elementary school. These children with socio-economic backgrounds similar to those in the two experimental schools served as the control group. Their reading gains were compared with gains made by second- and fifth-year children in the two experimental schools.

The tests were administered in November 1961 and May 1962. Since the two tests were administered five months apart, normal gains in reading during this time can be expected to be five months.

Children in the two experimental schools showed overall gains of 5.3 months in reading during the 5-month period (time between pre- and post-tests). Children in the control school showed overall gains of 2.8 months in reading during this period. Gains made by experimental school C were generally greater than those made by experimental school B. A factor which may contribute to this finding is that experimental school B entered the program somewhat later than did experimental school C and there were some problems in getting total staff involvement in this school. Children in all schools showed greater gains in reading vocabulary than in reading comprehension. Since reading comprehension encompasses a broader base than vocabulary, equivalent progress in comprehension can be expected as more time elapses.

Vocabulary and comprehension gains made by second grade children. Tables 1 and 2 compare vocabulary and comprehension mean gains made by second grade children in the two experimental schools with those made by children in the control school. Children in the two experimental schools made greater mean gains in vocabulary and comprehension than did children in the control school. The mean gain differences are highly significant for vocabulary for experimental schools B and C when compared with control school A. The mean gain differences for comprehension are also highly significant for experimental school C but are not significant for experimental school B.

Vocabulary and comprehension gains made by fifth grade children. Tables 3 and 4 compare vocabulary and comprehension mean gains made by fifth grade children in the two experimental schools with those made by children in the control school. An examination of Table 3 shows that children in the two experimental schools made significantly greater gains in vocabulary than did children in the control school. An examination of Table 4 shows that the gains made in comprehension are moderately significantly greater for children in experimental school C but not significantly greater for children in experimental school B.

Gains made by second grade children when vocabulary and comprehension are combined. A comparison of gains made when vocabulary and comprehension are combined shows that children in the two experimental schools made significantly greater gains than did children in the control school (see Table 5).

Gains made by fifth grade children when vocabulary and comprehension are combined. A comparison of gains made when vocabulary and comprehension are combined does not show significant differences for children in experimental school B when compared with control school A (see Table 6). The differences for these children are at a low positive but not quite significant level. Highly significant differences are disclosed, however, for children in experimental school C.

TABLE 1.---A comparison of second grade children's mean gains in vocabulary in the two experimental schools with those made by children in the control school.

Schools	Number of Children	Scores in Months		Significance of Differences	
		Mean Gains	Standard Deviation	Z-Score	Probability
Control A	66	3.6	3.6		
Experimental B	82	5.5	4.9	2.71	.01
Experimental C	71	5.8	3.9	3.44	.01

⁴ A probability of .05 is interpreted as moderately significant.
A probability of .01 is interpreted as highly significant.

TABLE 2.---A comparison of second grade children's mean gains in comprehension in the two experimental schools with those made by children in the control school.

Schools	Number of Children	Scores in Months		Significance of Differences	
		Mean Gains	Standard Deviation	Z-score	Probability
Control A	68	4.1	4.6		
Experimental B	82	4.9	5.3	.99	N.S.
Experimental C	71	7.1	4.9	3.70	.01

TABLE 3.---A comparison of fifth grade children's mean gains in vocabulary in the two experimental schools with those made by children in the control school.

Schools	Number of Children	Scores in Months		Significance of Differences	
		Mean Gains	Standard Deviation	Z-score	Probability
Control A	63	1.4	8.9		
Experimental B	70	6.4	7.9	3.42	.01
Experimental C	54	6.1	8.1	3.01	.01

TABLE 4.---A comparison of fifth grade children's mean gains in comprehension in the two experimental schools with those made by children in the control school.

Schools	Number of Children	Scores in Months		Significance of Differences	
		Mean Gains	Standard Deviation	Z-score	Probability
Control A	63	1.8	9.0		
Experimental B	70	1.3	9.7	.31	N.S.
Experimental C	54	5.7	10.3	2.17	.05

TABLE 5.---A comparison of second grade children's gains when vocabulary and comprehension are combined.

Schools	Number of Children	Scores in Months		Significance of Differences	
		Mean Gains	Standard Deviation	Z-score	Probability
Control A	63	3.9	3.2		
Experimental B	82	5.1	4.2	1.97	.05
Experimental C	71	6.4	3.1	4.63	.01

TABLE 6.---A comparison of fifth grade children's gains when vocabulary and comprehension are combined.

Schools	Number of Children	Scores in Months		Significance of Differences	
		Mean Gains	Standard Deviation	Z-score	Probability
Control A	60	1.7	6.4		
Experimental B	70	3.7	6.2	1.80	N.S.
Experimental C	53	6.0	6.4	3.55	.01

Parent-Opinion Questionnaire Results

One questionnaire was sent to each family in the two experimental schools to ascertain what opinion parents held about this program. The questionnaire contained three check-type questions and three open-end questions. Parents indicated that they felt the program helped the children with school work and that they would like to have the program continued. They also indicated that their involvement had been very helpful to them as well--indicating that it helped them improve their academic skills.

TABLE 7.---Parents' responses to the three check-type questions about the program.

Questions		Parents' Responses*	
		Experimental School B	Experimental School C
1. Was home study helpful?	Yes	146	153
	No	0	1
2. Was "Read to Me" ** helpful?	Yes	147	148
	No	1	0
3. Should program be continued?	Yes	148	156
	No	1	0

* One questionnaire was sent to each home.
 ** Parents read daily to their children.

Home-Study Survey Results

A survey was undertaken in the two experimental school communities to determine if parents had set aside a quiet time in the home for home study and for reading. Although all children reported to the teacher each day, the researcher wanted to know if parents had established a routine period for these activities. Parents indicated on the questionnaire the daily study time and signed the questionnaire. Results of this survey showed that 90 percent of the children in the two schools returned completed questionnaires to their teachers.

Teachers' Appraisal

Teachers said they noted improvement in children's work habits and in their attitudes toward school work.